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Competing for Space and Time

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MOODLE VS. SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS: COMPETING FOR SPACE AND TIME

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Abstract. Given the competition coming from various social media platforms, it is explored in this paper how students could be encouraged to use Moodle more proactively during their studies. Moodle is a course management system for online learning. It is designed to be a flexible template-based system, which provides a set of tools that support an inquiry- and discovery-based approach to online learning. It also aims to create an environment that encourages collaborative interaction among students. Moodle is also claimed to be very intuitive and easy to navigate. Evidence from Aalborg University and findings from a number of recent studies demonstrate that students access and use Moodle occasionally, on a need basis, and are reluctant to interact with each other in Moodle chat rooms and forums. This behavior could be explained by newness of Moodle as a system that it brings compared to already existing, known and widely used social platforms. It might be also due to the fact that students do not see the benefits in investing time and efforts in learning the new system. Another reason might be the mandatory nature of Moodle, i.e., it is imposed on students, rather than a free choice – and this might cause a negative reaction. Following these findings, a number of proposals are put forward on how to encourage students to use Moodle more proactively during their studies.

Keys words: Higher Education, students, Moodle, instruire online

Introduction: Moodle vs. Facebook

The aim of this study is to explore the ways of encouraging students to use Moodle more proactively during their studies, taking into consideration the competition coming from social media platforms, primarily, Facebook. With the Internet becoming an inseparable part of our life, the delivery of learning programs has partially shifted from the classroom to online-based applications. It stimulated the development of the course management systems for online learning. Course management system (CMS) is an e-learning platform, which is adopted to facilitate instructors and students to deliver course materials, submit assignments and tests, create learning activities, and share documents (NUIT 2013). The purpose of CMS is not to replace the traditional face-to-face learning modes, but to effectively supplement them with the opportunity of asynchronous online discussions and other learning activities.

One such system that has gained worldwide popularity is Moodle (<http://www.moodle.com>). Moodle is designed to be a flexible template-based system, which provides a set of tools that support an inquiry- and discovery-based approach to online learning (Brandl 2005). It aims to create an environment that encourages collaborative interaction among students. Moodle is also claimed to be very intuitive and easy to navigate. However, evidence from Aalborg University and findings from a number of recent studies (see Deng and Tavares 2013; Hew and Cheung 2007; Wong et al. 2013) demonstrate that students access and use Moodle occasionally, on a need basis, and are reluctant to interact with each other in Moodle chat rooms and forums. The findings also indicate

that there is a possible connection between the low activity on Moodle and hindered student productivity, as not logging on the study intranet regularly makes students fail to obtain important information provided by the secretariat and lecturers.

Addressing the problem of low student engagement, the paper is focusing on the reasons why Moodle is under-utilized and the ways to promote students' participation in online discussions on Moodle, as well as stimulate the use of the system on more regular basis in order to be fully updated on study matters and opportunities.

Moodle: inhibiting factors

Despite the functionality of Moodle and its seeming usefulness for studies, the data indicate that students utilize Moodle system for performing only limited learning activities. Students prefer using social networking sites (usually, Facebook) for discussing assignments and sharing learning materials with the classmates. In such a way, Moodle is seen as under-utilized, despite its collaborative learning potential (Wong et al. 2013).

Primarily, instructors report low students' participation in online discussions on Moodle. Moodle is used for informational purposes, such as downloading learning materials and receiving study announcements. The students generally agree that Moodle is a good storage place where they can find lecture notes and course materials.

There are subjective reasons for student preferences to use Facebook. The majority most likely prefers using Facebook for peer communications about study matters due to their habits and daily rituals (Wong et al. 2013); students have already built an online learning community in social networking sites and therefore are more willing to participate in discussion activities there.

Some students feel that the Moodle system is too formal. It is used solely for academic purposes and the system is imposed to the students. For communication with their peers, students prefer using other online tools – social networking sites. For communication with the instructors they most commonly choose a more direct and personal mean of communication, such as email.

The formal feel of the platform does not encourage active participation in discussions. Students note that they need to spend more time formulating their messages, they cannot be spontaneous and just share ideas without proper referencing. The presence of the instructor is often seen as another formalizing factor and inhibiting towards the lively discussion. The students feel they are being continuously evaluated and need to perform, which puts restraints on their activity. The mandatory nature of using Moodle as a platform for academic purposes might cause a negative reaction: it is imposed on students, rather than is a free choice for them.

However, there are some more objective reasons. Moodle and Facebook are perceived by the students as having considerable differences in their interfaces and functionality. Newness of Moodle as a system compared to already existing, known and widely used social platforms, and not very user-friendly interface do not encourage active use of the platform. Students do not see the benefits in investing time and efforts in learning a new system.

Besides, online discussions on Moodle are conducted asynchronously, that is, do not take place in real time. At the same time, the high frequency of visiting Facebook makes the online

discussions be practically conducted in the real time mode, not asynchronously as on Moodle. The students usually find the high speed of obtaining the response more appealing.

Attracting student participation: Recommendations

Basing on the identified low student engagement on Moodle, a number of proposals on how to encourage students to use Moodle more proactively during their studies can be put forward. The recommendations are mostly addressed to the developers and instructors.

The first recommendation concerns the common issue of the appearance, design and functionality of the platform. Developers can consider improving the interface, making it user-friendlier. Some inspiration can be taken from Facebook. This might reduce students' reluctance to use the platform, as it will require shorter adjustment time. The pages need to be easy to navigate, the important elements accessible and visible. For example, the latest news and announcements can be considered to be placed in the central area of the page. This would draw immediate attention to them and increase the chances of the information to be delivered to the target audience. Search functions need to be improved or simplified, as users might be discouraged not being able to navigate the pages and to obtain information quickly. Re-design of certain elements can be done in collaboration with the student teams in order to get feedback and test the adjustments.

Student participation in asynchronous online discussions can be attempted to be enhanced by means of instructor/tutor and student facilitation. Using simple communication techniques like giving own opinions or experiences, questioning, showing appreciation, personally inviting people to contribute, suggesting new directions and summarizing show to be rather efficient (Hew and Cheung 2008). Student facilitation can be of special value, as the interventions made by the instructor are at times viewed as very formal and hinder students' participation. On the opposite, growing activity from the peers might encourage discussion. For example, Poole (2000) claimed that students become more involved when the entire discussion is not instructor, but student facilitated.

Social networking websites, as key components of Web 2.0 technologies, encourage participatory culture (McLoughlin and Lee 2007). CMSs such as Moodle, although allow content creation and interaction, are largely restricted to 1.0 mentality. 1.0 is the "Read Only" Web (Aghaei et al. 2012), where in the user's role is limited to passively consuming information, which was presented to him/her. There is no active communication or information flow from consumer (of the information) to producer (of the information). Today's students belong to the generation of digital natives, who grew up in a very interactive Internet environment. They perceive the web only in the form of 2.0 or "Read-Write-Publish" web (ibid.), which has a great emphasis on interaction.

There is a risk, that with the time, Moodle will persist as a file storage and study announcements distribution platform. One way of enhancing the use of CMS could be to co-operate with popular social networking services like Facebook.

A number of studies (see, for example Bosch 2009; Zaidieh 2012) examined the use of social networking sites for studying and development of online learning communities. It may be wise to attempt integrating the Moodle system with popular social networking sites, primarily Facebook. It can help promoting e-learning and enhance collaboration between the students. As an example of such integration, a project called "Faboodle" can be mentioned here. Faboodle, or Facebook for

Moodle is a Facebook application, which enables educators and learners to keep track of their courses and interact of Moodle forums from within Facebook (Abeywardena 2011). This solution could make student participation on Moodle more interactive, due to the continuous receiving notifications from the CMS while social networking. However, the validity of such solution is under question and there is a risk that successful development of the extension can jeopardize the necessity of existence of CMS and switch the functionality solely to Facebook. Besides, instructors identify a number of legal, copyright and privacy issues that are associated with sharing academic content on Facebook. All these factors make the idea of integrating Facebook and Moodle is not yet possible.

Conclusion

At the first sight, Moodle, as a course management system, follows the trends of modern higher education and communication technologies, as well as fits the demands of contemporary students. However, the evidence from Aalborg University and a number of recent studies identifies a number of challenges related to efficiency of Moodle as a course management system.

This exploratory study identified a number of factors, inhibiting the effectiveness of Moodle. There are subjective reasons related to the students' habits to use social networking sites (primarily, Facebook) for peer communication; the formal feel of the platform; the imposed nature of the situation, when students are obliged to use Moodle for their studies.

However, there are a number of objective reasons, such as: not very intuitive interface, limited functionality, and asynchronous character of discussions on Moodle.

A number of recommendations were made as to how students' participation can be enhanced:

- First, it was proposed to develop better interface, making important elements more visible, as well as improve the search function.
- Second, to stimulate online discussions, where the roles of the instructor and student facilitation were emphasized.
- Third, it is very important to take into consideration the Web.2.0 mentality, which characterizes the generation of digital natives. Interaction and content creation possibilities are curtail for the users of this type.
- The last recommendation concerned integration Moodle with Facebook, which would allow to keep students better informed about the latest changes in Moodle groups. However, there are yet a number of technical, security and legal issues to be considered before it becomes possible.

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